

NARROWING THE GAP BETWEEN ACADEMIA AND PRACTICE THROUGH PARTNERSHIP: REFLECTIONS ABOUT CREATING UHAMBO LWAMI STORYBOOK DURING COVID-19

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Abstract

In March 2020, the first case of Covid-19 was reported in South Africa. The government swiftly responded and introduced lockdown measures to minimize contagion. Media and social conversations were dominated by news about the outbreak. Adults and children experienced fear, anxiety, depression, and distress as a result of the pandemic. Among social work responses to the pandemic, practitioners, protection organisations, and social work students developed innovative and context-relevant tool to address glaring gaps in the child protection field. Lack of well-developed child friendly Covid-19 edutainment tools in indigenous languages and tools that support children's psychological health in light of the pandemic were the gaps identified. In this paper, I reflect on the collaborative engagement between social work researchers, social work practitioners, and students to design and develop a tool which aimed to address practice-related gaps identified during the pandemic using an Afro-centric lens.

Keywords: Covid-19, social work interventions, child friendly, storybook, Afro-centric approaches

Narrowing the gap between academia and practice through partnership: Reflections about creating Uhambo Lwami storybook during COVID-19

At the early onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, a call was made for extensive collaboration, partnership, and teamwork among scientists, social workers, academic institutions to minimise the spread and impact of the pandemic on society (Chakraborty et al., 2020). With its foundation on social justice, rights, and inclusivity, the social work profession has long been responsive to making societal change in a crisis. During the pandemic, protecting children and reducing their risk to poor mental health and increased vulnerability was raised by researchers globally (Meherali et al., 2021; Gee et al., 2021; Lateef et al., 2021; O'Sullivan et al., 2021; Fore & Hijazi, 2020). The need to engage and

communicate with children using age appropriate methods and terminology was identified to protect their psychological health (Dalton et al., 2020). Similarly, social work practitioners, psychiatrists, and media reported concerns about the mental health impact of Covid-19 on children and the lack of resources for supporting children in South Africa (Ntshingila & du Plesis-Faurie, 2023; Zuma, 2022).

Adults, in their effort to protect children from distress, tend to avoid talking to children about sensitive events happening around them. Yet, consistently, research indicates that communicating with children in a timely manner and in alignment with their developmental stage can reduce anxiety during distress (Dalton et al., 2020). Of note was the exclusion of children from public communication channels about the pandemic (Campbell & Carnevale, 2022). In some contexts, children voiced their concerns about their exclusion and the absence of open dialogues and reciprocal communications with children who faced a range of psycho-social and economic fallout because of the pandemic (World Health Organisation & United Nations Children's Fund, 2022). In South Africa, children residing in rural areas had no access to child-friendly information about the pandemic and the consultative initiative between the project team and non-governmental organisations from rural areas confirmed our suspicion.

A swift response from the Interagency Standing Committee Reference Group on Mental Health and Psycho-social Support in Emergency Setting (AISC MHPSS RS) which is the highest-level humanitarian coordination forum created by the United Nations General Assembly in 1991 indicates an intent to include children in Covid-19 communication. The forum developed an online Covid-19 storybook for children titled *My Hero is you* in 2020. This storybook with cartoon illustrations communicates Covid-19 information using child-friendly language and has been translated into over 30 languages. Such important resources however were not accessible to children without internet connectivity. In South Africa, the majority of children, particularly in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, reside in rural areas and access to internet is relatively low. Considering that the storybook was designed to accommodate children from diverse contexts, AISC MHPSS's initiative though timely, lacked context-specificity and relevance to the daily experiences of the majority of South African children. Africa's cultural landscape is historically grounded in storytelling as a means of connecting nature and human beings to preserve traditions, scaffold multiple dimensions of wellness, and promote adaptation to various forms of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental challenges. The idea to use a storybook format as a child-friendly tool to educate and engage children emerged from this understanding.

The Relevance of Storybooks with Children

Storybooks and oral stories are common practices across all cultures. Although storytelling can be based on a fantasy, when it is couched within real-life experiences, it engages the readers and validates their personal experiences (Hartling et al., 2010; Glazer & Marcum, 2010). Sub-Saharan African families are strongly rooted in the tradition of oral storytelling. It is used for knowledge production and transmission (Tuwe, 2016). In Black South African families, stories called *izinganekwane* also known as folklore, are traditionally used to teach morals, maintain cultural values, and entertain children. It is thus an appropriate tool and tradition for communicating information to children, particularly complex issues or concepts such as those involved with pandemics.

There is precedent for the incorporation of storytelling into health care delivery. In South Africa for example, health care workers use *Kidz Alive* talk tool storybook to provide a range of HIV psychosocial support services to children in order to improve their health outcomes (Mutambo et al., 2021). The storybook, a colorful cartoon-based tool, is used in the delivery of HIV care services for children including HIV counselling and testing, HIV disclosure, treatment adherence counselling, and HIV patient literacy. The findings from the study conducted with primary caregivers of children living with HIV and taking antiretroviral treatment and health care workers who used *Kidz Alive* talk tool indicate that the tool promotes child active participation in their HIV care and increase the participation of primary caregivers in the care of their children (Mutambo et al., 2021). The storybook simplified difficult concepts related to the different stages of HIV illness and care. In addition, the story was entertaining to children, a key component to connect the child with the story. Similarly, in Namibia, the health care workers from pediatric clinics providing care to children living with HIV integrated a cartoon storybook titled *Why I take my Medication* to promote HIV disclosure in children (Brandt et al., 2015). Both books use child friendly terminology and cartoons to improve the HIV disclosure process and promote adherence to antiretroviral treatment. In other instances, digital storybooks have been incorporated into HIV care to communicate concepts such as HIV testing, medication, and adherence in a child friendly way (Ndaba, 2020). Storybooks have become a common technique to deliver health education and promote child participation in health care.

In child therapeutic contexts, counsellors may incorporate storybooks to complement play therapy. By incorporating this intervention, counsellors use metaphors which are regarded as the language of play and the child can deal with painful emotions symbolically using the story symbols, thereby distancing themselves from the painful themes. Therapeutic stories are beneficial when used with children experiencing bereavement, depression, temper tantrums, anxiety, and other childhood difficulties (Yati et al., 2017; Cook et al., 2004; Liu & Williams, 2019). In therapeutic contexts, the success of using the storybook can be determined by the child's connection with the story in question, for example, when the child asks for the story repeatedly or responds positively to the storybook.

Bridging the Gap between Academia and Practice through Partnership

When responding to an unprecedented crisis such as Covid-19, evidence to guide and inform practice tends to be limited therefore, collaboration between academic researchers and practitioners may be necessary to find innovative ways that inform practice. To achieve this goal, partners must share complementary expertise for the collaboration to thrive. In 2019, before the onset of Covid-19, the project team consisting of academics from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa) and Fachhochschule Dortmund University (Germany) received joint funding from Academic Exchange Services (DAAD) for a four-year project which aimed to build social work competencies through internationalization. In 2020, DAAD invited funded partners to apply for additional funding to develop initiatives to support communities during Covid-19.

The project team invited social work practitioners from child protection organisations such as Lulisandla Kumntwana, Ma'at Institute, and Kacoon who had the necessary expertise and knowledge and were in touch with communities to give input into the development of the proposal by giving insights about unique challenges presented by Covid-19 on children in low-income communities and the nature

of support that could enhance their response. The telephonic consultations indicated that a resource that provides information about Covid-19 while promoting communication with children about the psycho-social issues they face sensitively would be useful. The practitioners strongly recommended that the resource should provide more than Covid-19 information.

In 2020, the project team received funding for developing the proposed idea. Through this partnership, the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) brought their expertise and knowledge to develop the storybook, its dissemination, and animation creation. Uhambo Lwami storybook, which is narrated by the main character of the book, Nsimenhle, tells a story of Covid-19 and its impact on her life, including her siblings, caregiver, and uncle who worked as a migrant worker in the mines. In South Africa, migrant work is a common practice due to the legacy of colonialism and segregation and has affected family structures and shaped children's family life experiences (Vosloo, 2020; Mazibuko, 2000).

Figure 1

Cover page of Uhambo Lwami storybook (English version)



Collaborative Processes in the Making of Uhambo Lwami Covid-19 Storybook

Following a successful grant application with the participating NGO's as partners, a three-day workshop was held to design and develop the storybook which is informed by Piaget's cognitive development theory and Afrocentric paradigm. The diverse group, consisting of qualified social workers, social work intern students, social work academic, graphic designer, and a professional with expertise in youth development and marketing, participated in the process. Community-specific knowledge, expertise gained from working with children, child development knowledge, technical skills of writing a book, and design were the necessary skills embedded in partners.

Recognizing the diversity of the group in terms of age, experience, and expertise, the group identified key values and principles to guide the interactive creative process. These include mutual respect, spirit of Ubuntu, equality, and a non-judgmental attitude underpinned the group's interactions and discussions. Child friendly, child-led, and context-specificity were the key principles selected to guide decision making during the critical stages of the project. Firstly, the group acknowledged that the terminology, illustrations, colours, and activities used in the storybook should be age appropriate. Secondly, the tool must be child-led, meaning that the child's use of the tool must not depend on adults. The child must be able to engage with the tool and lead the process while adults remain in assistive roles. Thirdly, the storybook must reflect the everyday life and experiences of children from KwaZulu-Natal. For example, Uhambo Lwami storyline adopts a family setting that is led by a grandparent and a ten-year old child called Nsimu and isiZulu as the primary language. Therefore, the story not only make children understand about Covid-19, it normalises the African context and the other socioeconomic variables that inform the family setting (Mthembu, 2021).

Figure 2

Nsimenhle's family which depicts the general construction of families in South Africa



There was a desire to incorporate, consider, and validate indigenous languages and the African context without relying on the language and context of the global north. Wa Thiong'o (1986) has argued for the impossibilities of learning that emanates solely from a global north context as it discourages diversity. Such diversity increases engagement and makes stories fun and satisfying. It

was important that the choice of languages for the storybook reflect the South African context of children. Wa Thiong'o (1986) argues that language is not merely a communication tool, it is culture, identity, and includes a wealth of traditional and indigenous knowledge. Child stories that uses child friendly language allow for equal sharing, exploration of ideas and experiences. These values and principles provided a set of criteria against which the decisions about the storybook book can be monitored and evaluated.

Understanding social workers' perceptions about the needs of children and their families during Covid-19 provided a context from which to begin the reflection and analyses process. Fook's (2015) differentiation of reflective practice from critical reflection informed the pedagogy of the storybook. The reflective practice focuses on the 'process of reflection upon professional practice, which involves identifying hidden incongruences between espoused practice thinking and actual practice on the ground (Fook, 2015). During brainstorming sessions, participants used questions such as: "What are my beliefs about this statement," "What am I doing, how am I doing it, and what influences my action." Critical reflections, on the other hand, may be viewed within the context of differential power relations and how people's experiences are inextricably linked to dominant social structures (Fook, 2015).

The participants identified children's psycho-social and economic needs, such as food insecurity, poor mental health, child abuse, and exposure to violence exacerbated by the pandemic. In addition, the intersection of single motherhood, households headed by grandparents, and Covid-19 contributed to the increased risk to financial difficulties, stress, and inadequate supply of basic needs in families. In low-income households, children's psychological health during a crisis may often receive less attention as families focus on survival and meeting their basic needs (Villa & Demmer, 2005). Supporting the psychological health of children by creating a safe space for children to express themselves and identify children requiring more intensive support was emphasized as the main objective. Reaching the most vulnerable children during the pandemic required the use of innovative strategies to identify vulnerable children and those needing intensive support through a collaborative effort.

Globally, many families experienced multiple Covid-19 related deaths and in South Africa, over 100 000 people lost their lives (World Health Organisation, 2021). In this phase of post-pandemic analyses, it is unclear how children and their families communicated about grief and loss. Considering that some families are one-parent households, parental loss further increases the risk of child vulnerability. Admittedly, not all these challenges can be resolved by using a storybook; however, it can be used to facilitate sharing of the experience and thereafter, professional interventions can be undertaken.

The following stages were undertaken:

- **Stage One:** Critical reflections about practice-based knowledge and literature concerning the needs of children during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- **Stage Two:** Developing a storyline and characters for the storybook
- **Stage Three:** Brainstorming about the setting and context for the storybook and book characters
- **Stage Four:** Writing the storybook dialogue
- **Stage Five:** Brainstorming the storybook illustrations and activities

- **Stage Six:** Selecting the book colours
- **Stage Seven:** Editing process and publishing

In contemporary times, technology enables stories to be delivered through computers, cartoons, videos and other media. In this project, we used a paper-based format to promote book accessibility to children with little or no computer or internet connectivity. The book is built around the understanding that the benefits of using this medium with a child lies in selecting a story that accurately reflects the problem situation. In addition, the storybook had to demonstrate diversity and context-specificity in storytelling for it to be effective.

During the storyline development, different beliefs pertaining to the involvement of children in death rituals such as body viewing, attending funerals as well the role of children when there is death in the family indicated the importance of reflections in generating knowledge among the participants. In the traditional Zulu culture, death is generally associated with pollution; therefore, children are prohibited from attending funerals (Ngubane, 1977). In modern Zulu families, there is less rigidity and children play a more active role when there is a death in the family. During the storyline development, the group debated the participation of Nsimu and her siblings and their positioning in death-related rituals. Using a child's right lens, Nsimu, the main child character attends her grandmother's funeral during the pandemic and shares her experiences.

Critical reflections pertaining to the gendered roles of child caregiving within the African context were challenged to recognise that males can play a crucial role in child caregiving. In the storybook, the uncle becomes the primary guardian of Nsimu and her siblings after the death of the grandmother. This decision challenges the commonly held notions around gendered expectations and norms associated with masculinity. The discussion further illuminated the influence of religious beliefs on perceptions and understanding of Covid-19. For example, some members of the working group suggested incorporating bible verses in the storybook. These suggestions were debated, and the group decided to exclude biblical references. Baldwin (2012) warns that feelings can block or generate knowledge development during the reflection process therefore open-mindedness is key.

In day three, the group completed the manuscript, which included character dialogue, suggested cartoon illustrations, and proposed colours for the storybook. The agreed-upon principles of developing a child-centred, child-led, and child friendly storybook provided a guide to monitor the storybook development process. These principles were constantly reflected upon during the storybook development and editing phase with project partners.

Selection of Activities for the Storybook

The input from the participating organisations was critical as the group discussed a range of activities and the nature and format of the activities. The group acknowledged that playful experiences offer multiple learning opportunities and safe space for children to try out and take risks. A full spectrum of practices such as free play, guided play, and directed play allow children to learn different skills and competencies (Jensen et al., 2019). The group recommended that Uhambo Lwami storybooks should include a set of activities that offer a spectrum of play activities that can be self-directed by a child or guided by an adult. The storybook's child-directed activities include colouring the characters, mix and match Covid-19 information, and connecting the dots and are suitable for children aged five to 10.

Often, children require minimal guidance from adults to complete these activities. Children with ample of occasions to engage in child- directed activities demonstrate great self-control and self-esteem (Barker et al., 2014). In completing some of the activities, children may require guidance from adults. For example, one of the activities requires children to share about loss through drawings or written narration using a perforated page in the storybook. The role of an adult is to support and validate the child’s emotions. These spectrum of play activities help the child to learn and express himself/herself verbally and creatively without using words.

Figure 3
The spectrum of play activities in Uhambo Lwami storybook

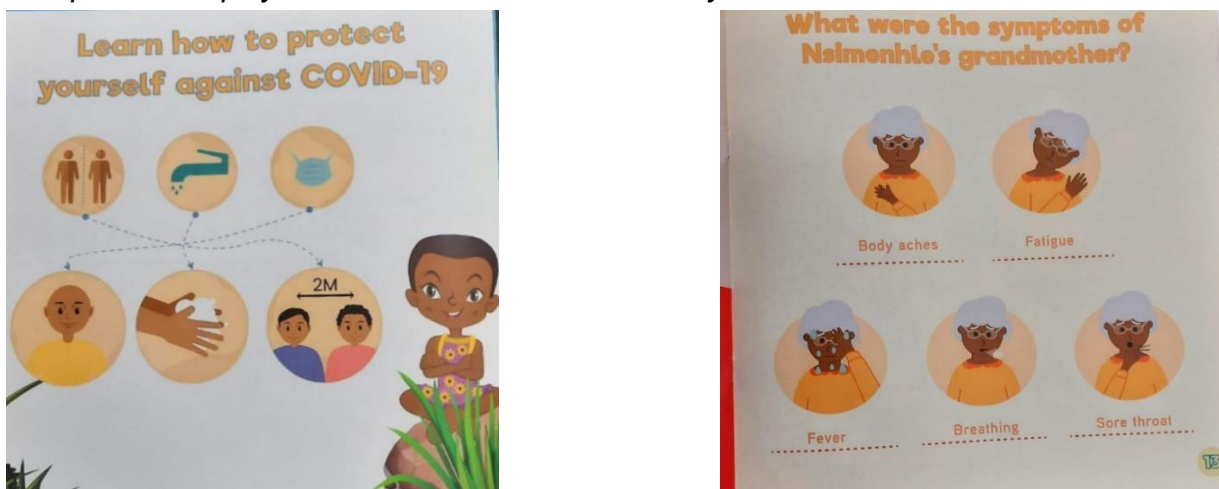
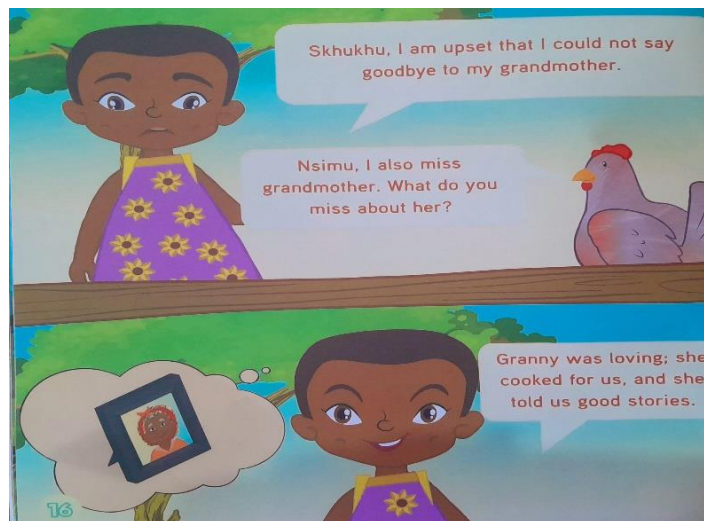


Figure 4
The image below is a depiction of Nsimu and Skhukhu engaged in discourse. The image represents the importance of friendship and positive relations.



Storybook Dissemination

The participating NGOs took ownership for the book distribution, and they identified beneficiaries. Taping on their extended knowledge of local networks functioning, the NGOs distributed the book to other local partners such as schools, clinics, and hospitals. The storybook was used as part of the schools' COVID-19 psycho-social response program implemented through small groups, class-based discussions, and individual sessions. To strengthen this program in schools, teachers received basic training on using the storybook as a tool to support children in expressing their experiences and feelings about the pandemic. Teachers are instrumental in promoting school connectedness, which refers to the extent to which learners feel accepted, valued, and included in the school (Skeen et al., 2021; Shochet et al., 2006; Huang, 2017). In addition, supportive child-teacher relationships can protect mental health (Miller-Lewis et al., 2013). Over 10,000 storybooks have now been distributed in public schools and communities in South Africa. Initially, the storybook was published in IsiZulu and later translated into six South African indigenous languages, including IsiXhosa, Sepedi, Sesotho, Afrikaans, and Setswana. A sense of ownership and pride was observed in children and adults as they read the book with familiar names, places, and environments during the visits to hand over the storybook to children.

The Use of the Storybook

Due to the versatility of the storybook, the feedback from social workers and child and youth care workers indicated that they used the book in multiple ways with children. Firstly, they used the storybook as an educational tool to provide health promotion information about Covid-19 including prevention messages and behaviour in class-based programs. Secondly, social workers specifically used the storybook to build relationships in grief and bereavement child sessions and validate children's feelings about loss. Thirdly, they used the storybook for school-based intervention to create spaces for children to talk about the impact of Covid-19 in their lives. Social workers further reflected that although the storybook addressed complex topics such as death and illness sensitively, talking about death was distressing for children. Such reflections caution us to be considerate when creating storybooks that include sensitive themes such as loss, which could trigger unresolved grief and bereavement.

The Journey of Uhambo Lwami: From Print to Animation

In South Africa, the storybook received massive publicity from the general print and visual media as the first indigenous intervention which aimed to include children in Covid-19 communication, and this was shared with funders and partner organisations. Through better coordination and collaboration, partner organisations managed to reach underserved and hard-to-reach communities. Thus, collaboration can provide NGOs with capabilities to respond better to pressing concerns in communities. In their storybook evaluation, children shared what they liked about the storybook including the book's cartoon illustrations, characters, especially Skhukhu, the talking chicken, and the loving uncle and grandmother. Sadness about the passing of the grandmother was expressed. The participating organisations raised the unintended exclusion of differently-abled children and those who cannot read as a major gap. This gap as well as high printing costs to make the storybook freely

available and high demand for the storybook prompted the funders to approach the project team to develop a resource that could be shared easily and target a larger general population including primary caregivers. This birthed the idea of creating an animation based on the storybook.

To initiate the project, a three-day workshop was held with 14 children aged 7–12 recruited from rural and urban communities of KwaZulu-Natal, the animation team, and social workers from the participating child protection organisations. Through creative art, painting, and performance, children shared their views and perceptions about the pandemic and these were integrated into the making of *Uhambo Lwami* 12-minute animation. In the animation storyline, the grandmother does not die and there is no funeral. The change was prompted by the ethical responsibility to minimise possible re-traumatisation and trigger of unresolved grief in children particularly because the animation was going to be distributed on digital platforms where debriefing and counselling support for children may not be guaranteed. The animation is available in isiZulu and English.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Globally, the value of collaboration and partnerships during the pandemic necessitated by the complex nature of Covid-19 and its impact was illuminated. Cross-partnerships which involve multiple stakeholders such as non-governmental organisations, academic, and public institutions, create positive value for the stakeholders which include diverse expertise, community, and practice-based knowledge. This paper further evidences the value of local-international academic partnerships to channel resources and financial capital to enable innovations that strengthen psycho-social responses in communities. During global emergencies, no organisation has all the necessary expertise and resources to make a meaningful societal impact. Often, organisations operating in low-income communities lack the resources and capacity to respond with urgency when there is a crisis. Through collaborations, partners can augment their collective capacity by mobilizing their shared pool of resources, capabilities, and experience (Ritvala et al., 2014), which is needed to deliver novel, more effective solutions and interventions for resolving societal problems. In this project, creating opportunities to learn, innovate, and think outside the box was critical to reach the desired goal.

The project provided opportunities for mutual learning, adaptation, and experimenting which resulted in empowerment, acquiring new skills, and improved practice models among the project participants. The success of such collaborations results from creating a conducive environment for partners to participate and be heard. As evidenced in this project, there was a sense of ownership from partner organisations whose contribution was acknowledged in the storybook and animation. In fact, in the storybook, the project partners are acknowledged as writers as opposed to being partners. This validates their immense intellectual contribution to the project.

Considering that this project was short-term, challenges associated with collaborations especially cross-sector, such as communication challenges and competing agendas were not pronounced (Arslan et al., 2020). When present, they can derail the working process and limit the ability to address common goals. The success of the storybook and animation continues to date and remain an innovative response during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

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